

So, We're Not Exactly Chile

By Burt Constable

Daily Herald

March 15, 2006

Fresh from witnessing the inauguration of Chile's first woman president, an American delegation of female politicians and scholars returned Monday, buoyed by a growing sense that a woman could be elected president in this country, too.

"It was positively thrilling to be there in Chile," says Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, who represents the 9th Congressional district, which takes in most of Des Plaines and Park Ridge, as well as Niles, Skokie and Evanston. "It reminds one that change - dramatic change - does happen."

Chile is a deeply Catholic and patriarchal nation where abortion (while common) is illegal and divorce only recently became a legal option for women. Michelle Bachelet worked her way through the political system, overcame the obvious barriers to women and won 53 percent of the vote in a free election. Women recently have won election or re-election to the top posts in Germany, Liberia, Finland and Jamaica.

While Chile still has a male majority in its legislature, the new president Bachelet made good on a campaign promise to select a cabinet with an equal number of men and women.

The political climate for a female president in our country remains more chilly than Chilean.

The White House Project - a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that advances women's leadership, and sponsored the trip to Chile - cheerily notes our nation has come a long way. In 1955, only 52 percent of Americans said they'd be willing to vote for a woman as president. Now, 92 percent say they'd vote for a woman if she were qualified.

That may be swell news, but it still means that roughly one out of every 12 Americans automatically thinks anyone who lacks a penis is unfit to be president. Shouldn't we be better than this in 2006?

Even in Congress, where Schakowsky is joined by fellow Democrat Melissa Bean of Barrington and Republican Judy Biggert of Hinsdale, women account for only 15 percent of the membership. Democrat Lisa Madigan is our attorney general, State Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka could win the GOP nomination for the governor's office, and a host of women are running for other statewide and national offices. But women in elected offices are still the minority here.

The number of women serving in state legislatures nationwide has increased more than fourfold since 1972, but women, while a majority of the population, hold only 22.8 percent of those positions, according to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

The number of women in the Illinois legislature has doubled in the last 25 years. But the advances slowed after the bump of 1992's Year of the Woman, and females still are outnumbered by men nearly 3-1.

"We had been in a rut, but I see the rut widening now," says Marie C. Wilson, founder of and president of The White House Project. She sees the rut broadening into a road to the White House.

"Quite frankly, I'd say the United States is ready to elect a woman," Schakowsky says, "if the

right one came along."

Polls show that voters now trust women on issues such as foreign policy, the economy and security, Wilson says. And issues such as health care, education, the environment and diplomatic relations with the rest of the world could tip public opinion toward a female candidate, Schakowsky says.

"I think this is going to be the 'Century of the Woman,'" Schakowsky predicts. "I have no doubt at all we'll have a woman president sooner rather than later."

Visitors to the Web site <http://thewhitehouseproject.org> can cast a straw vote for one of eight women considered potential presidential material.

While acknowledging such gimmicks bring attention to the campaign, Wilson says she longs for a day when voters care more about a female candidate's agenda than her gender. But if you want to play the game of gender stereotypes, Wilson says that could help get a woman elected in 2008.

"When things get pretty messy, women get to clean up," Wilson notes. "And things are pretty messy."